

Tuapeka Mouth Ferry: Taking heritage into the future

Roger Hodgkinson¹ and Murray John Service²

¹ Local Historian, Te Anau, New Zealand; rogaa@xtra.co.nz

² Tuapeka Turbines, Auckland, New Zealand; jservice@ihug.co.nz

Abstract

The paper outlines the history of the Tuapeka Mouth Ferry (also known as the Tuapeka Punt) from its establishment in 1895 to the present day operation, including conditions in the area at the time of its planning and construction and operating incidents. The paper also details council and local settler petitions and operation disputes, design modifications, and accidents. The paper is supported by photographs covering various aspects of the punt's operation over its life to the present day.

1. Introduction

The iconic Tuapeka Mouth Ferry is one of New Zealand's national treasures - the last current driven public ferry (punt) operating in the Southern Hemisphere.

The ferry carries vehicles, cyclists and passengers across the mighty Clutha River near Tuapeka Mouth, a small township in the picturesque Clutha Valley. The ferry has been in continual use since 1896, although service has sometimes been affected and interrupted by river levels, wind, or maintenance.

Early in the history of European settlement the Clutha River was crossed by rowboats, however community agitation saw a public ferry service established near Tuapeka Mouth.

Known locally as 'The Punt', the original vessel had wooden pontoon hulls. This was replaced in 1915 by a larger steel hulled punt that previously operated on the Waiau River in Southland. It was shipped up the Clutha River to its present site, by paddle-steamer.



Figure 1: Paddlesteamer "Matau" (1882-1901) passing the Tuapeka Mouth Ferry on the Clutha River (from the Frank Leckie collection).

To control the ferry, two heavy wire cables across the river (one upstream and one downstream) are permanently attached, and the craft is powered across the river solely by water pressure against

the hulls. The direction is dictated by the rudders setting which directs the hulls at an angle against the river's current. This historic ferry generally crosses the 130 metre (m) width of the river in about four minutes.



Figure 2: Clutha district council map (black spot denoting punt location).



Figure 3: View from mill hill Clutha valley with punt in distance (Photo by John McGowan).

The Punt has been used to carry livestock and farm equipment, horses, gigs, and wagons. However, today it usually carries cars, other motorized road vehicles, cyclists and pedestrians.

This paper outlines the history of the Punt from its early installation and operation up to the present day. It remains an important part of the local road network, is owned by the Clutha District Council

(and part funded by the New Zealand Transport Agency), and is operated by the Clutha District Council's Roading Maintenance Contractor.

2. History of the Tuapeka Mouth Ferry [1]

By repute, the first ferry at Tuapeka Mouth was a privately-owned whaleboat in use from about 1871. Records show that as early as January 1862 J. Lowe wrote to the Provincial Government requesting permission to build a ferry house at the junction of the Tuapeka and Molyneux Rivers, which indicates the existence of a ferry. [2] It was some 20 years after the abolition of the provinces, however, before settlers petitioned the Tuapeka County Council (TCC) for a public ferry. [3]



Figure 4: The original puntmans cottage (South Otago Museum collection).

After some debate over funding, TCC became the major backer of the project, with a Government subsidy and a minimum of support from Clutha County (the river forming the boundary between the two counties). Tenders were called in August 1895, and the building contract was let to Tyson and Dunlop for £333. Service officially started on February 22 1896. [4 and 5]

To make the punt self-supporting TCC secured support for a toll, at the same time introducing similar rates for its other punts. Users of the nearby Rongahere punt were not pleased, as there had previously been no charge for that ferry. Initial rates at Tuapeka Mouth were: passengers, 6d; horses, 6d; cattle, 3d; sheep, 20 or less, 1d; 20-200, 1/2d; over 200, 1/4d. [6] Reporting the opening of the punt, the *Otago Witness* remarked that at 6d a horse the benefits of the ferry were doubtful: "Why should ratepayers pay for what is free at Millers Flat?" [7]

Bill Buchan, the first puntman, reported that in the initial monthly period (22 February–22 March), 336 passengers and 255 horses crossed over. [8] By 1901, a six-month tally gave these figures: Tuapeka to Clutha - 984 persons, 751 horses, 149 vehicles, 200 sheep; Clutha to Tuapeka - 918 persons, 689 horses, 104 vehicles, 425 sheep. [9]



Figure 5: Commemorative plaque (Photo by Roger Hodgkinson).

In 1900 the TCC asked the Government to give it control of the punt with authority to charge half the cost of past and future maintenance to Clutha County. But Clutha had consistently opposed the Tuapeka Mouth punt, since it operated the Clydevale punt only 11 kilometres (km) downstream. The Rongahere punt was only 3.2 km upstream, so Clutha declined to contribute to Tuapeka Mouth costs and maintenance. However, it offered some used wire rope, the plans of the Clydevale punt and the services of its engineer.

The Chief Surveyor of the Lands and Survey Department headed an inquiry at the Tuapeka County Chambers, Lawrence, into the liability of the two councils and Clutha felt vindicated when it was decided to divide the costs in the proportion: Tuapeka County 85% and Clutha County 15%. In 1902 the punt was officially vested in the Tuapeka County Council. [10] However, a 50/50 division was agreed to in 1907, with effect from January 1908, and after the age of the motor vehicle arrived the Government subsidy was replaced with annual subsidies from the Main Highways Board and later, the National Roads Board. [11]



Figure 6: High side configuration for cattle (Tuapeka Mouth Ferry, Neg E1332/8 Hocken Collections University of Otago Library).



Figure 7: The Ferry Pontoon at Tuapeka Mouth: Type of crossing which is fast disappearing in New Zealand (Otago Witness).

Throughout its operation the Tuapeka Mouth punt was a platform on two boats, but improvements were made from time to time. Major repairs were carried out in 1908 and in about 1915 the boats were enlarged and the decking lengthened. This was described as a 'patch-up' job, as the punt was old and ready for replacement. [12] With the opening in February 1915 of a bridge over the Waiau River at Tuatapere, the punt there became available, and over a three-month period it was dismantled by John Smith (the Clutha County foreman), railed to Balclutha, and taken by river steamer to Tuapeka Mouth. [13 and 14]

The new punt was larger than the one it replaced, being equipped with twin iron-hulled boats, and when it came into service in late 1915 it was a considerable improvement. The punt in use today is substantially the craft introduced in 1915, and Marine Department certificates ensure safety standards are maintained. In a major overhaul in the late 1980s, new runners, new sides and new decking of Indian jarrah replaced older fittings. [15] For a time the punt operated with an engine and propeller, installed in 1940 or 1941 from the Clutha County's Paretai punt, but for some reason the engine was later taken out.

Problems have led to occasional strife between residents and the County authority. In May 1928 they complained of irregular and unreliable operation of the ferry, disruptions being caused by river and wind conditions. [16] The locals, of course, wanted a bridge, but were not given one. From 1945 there was an almost constant struggle between Council and residents who, if they couldn't get their bridge, certainly demanded retention of the punt. In 1945 the Council set up a subcommittee to press for replacement of the punt and upgrading of the road via Rongahere to Beaumont. The Tuapeka Mouth Progressive League, which convened a public meeting in early

1946, presented substantial reasons for a permanent crossing.



Figure 8: In transit (Punt on Clutha, Tuapeka Mouth, c/nE3537/35 Hocken Collections University of Otago Library).

The resignation of puntman Whitty led to a closure of the service from 1 February 1947. A deputation and petition to the Council followed, and the punt was restored to service with a temporary puntman until a contractor was found to undertake its operation. The suspension of the service in 1948 caused residents again to suspect imminent closure, but a low river and serious shoaling had been the problem. [17] Weekly saledays at Tuapeka Mouth had been the busiest times for the punt and the ending of the sales in the late 1940s greatly reduced patronage. [18]

Apart from a few test bores, no progress was made towards a bridge and in May 1956 the punt was closed for some time for extensive repairs. Only then would the Marine Department renew its certificate. [19]

When Bill Small was puntman, the punt broke away a short distance with the mail bus, Dave Cross and Richie Crawford on board. The river was low, the punt scraped too hard, and while the ropes held, the sheerlegs on the bank gave way. Graham Geddes arrived with his tractor and Jack May of Clydevale rowed out with a rope, but on the

first attempt to winch the punt back the rope broke. A second attempt succeeded.

In the 1950s, Bill Small's time as puntman, the punt operated seven days a week, 7am to 7pm, with an after-hours charge of 2s 6d. His pay under contract with the TCC was £1 a day, and he only had Saturdays off. Besides the mail bus, there was a steady flow of traffic to and from the Tuapeka Mouth garage, and the storekeeper made deliveries to Wharetoa. For a time heavy trucks unloaded their freight on one side of the river and reloaded on the other, but later they stopped using the punt altogether.



Figure 9: Tuapeka mouth punt after Tuapeka County workmen removed jetty planking, June 1966, Ministry of Works Dunedin (Hocken Collections University of Otago Library).

In September 1960 steel decking was installed on the punt-boats and life rafts provided, but a decade of peace was broken in 1966 by a debate over the condition of the punthouse, which had been occupied by both Small and his successor, WE Gray, (Bill Gray, incidentally, earned the nickname 'the Admiral' after he was given a handsome yachting hat by a grateful American). [20] Tuapeka doubted that Clutha County would wish to share the cost of a new house, but Clutha authorised limited repairs and said it wished the punt to be retained, An annual review of the position was to follow.



Figure 10: Waiting for the Tuapeka Mouth punt to moor at the landing stage c.1964 [Courtesy Maureen Finch, Waiholā]

The sudden resignation of the puntman, however, led to a confused situation with County workmen starting to dismantle the staging early on 3 June. Car-loads of residents gathered and about 60 quickly convened a meeting, set up a committee, and made representations to all those in authority. There was some delight when the workmen grounded the ferry in midstream. But it transpired that the Tuapeka County Chairman and Clerk had merely decided to remove the staging to prevent unauthorised use of the ferry in the absence of an operator. The next development was that the chairmen of the two Councils announced that minor repairs would be made to the punthouse and tenders were called for the operation of the service. If these were uneconomic local ratepayers would be consulted. However, the tender of W.E. Gray was accepted and the service resumed on 3 October, with the tenderer providing his own accommodation. [21] The punt-house, incidentally, was later destroyed by fire.

River conditions have not always been kind - if the river was high or low the punt was in difficulty. Early goldminers dredging upstream created a gravel-bar, and later the Roxburgh power station affected water levels and the gravel deposits. When the river is low there may be insufficient current to drive it, or it may ground in shallow water, while the loading and unloading angles to the stages become too steep. [22] In August 1978, when Tuapeka and Clutha County representatives came to see the problem for themselves, they too were marooned midstream for 2.5 hours as a result of the low river level. Yet six weeks later a flood submerged the jetty and access slope, the water level reached the door of the puntman's house, and the punt was pulled up on to the road near the shed. [23] Floods or high wind made it difficult to work the punt away from the Wharetoa bank, though provision of a handwinch and a wire rope attached to the cable downstream of the ferry helped with the problem. By the 1990s the handwinch was no longer in use.



Figure 11: Mid stream crossing in flood waters (Tuapeka Mouth, c/nE5792/20 Hocken Collections University of Otago Library)

C.F. Lucas recalled that the punts:

...were a most unsatisfactory way of crossing this huge river, as often one would get over all right in the morning and not be able to get back at night owing to the wind, and many a night I have waited at the Tuapeka Mouth punt in the pouring rain for a couple of hours, and then the puntman would yell out that he was going to bed as there was no chance of crossing that night as he couldn't get the punt out. I would then get on my horse and ride up to the Rongahere punt which was much more sheltered and usually got over there. This meant an extra twelve miles ride. [24]

Even the puntman could be stranded by high wind, which also affected settlers and stock, and delayed the mail. From time to time the Roxburgh dam authorities would advise they were about to release an accumulation of logs. At such times service was suspended and the punt was moored on the Rongahere side. [25]

In the ferry's long years of operations it was inevitable that there should be a number of accidents.

On 11 March 1913 Annie Bennie and her brother William were crossing in a gig on a cold, wet night when their horse backed off the punt, taking Annie and the gig with it. William and puntman Nehoff gave chase in the punt's boat and rescued her about 1.5 km downstream. Miss Bennie sustained a broken collarbone, bruising and shock. The horse and remains of the gig were found stranded at Cox's Landing. Nehoff was given a presentation for his gallant rescue and the TCC engineer was instructed to supply the punt with strong gates and impose rules for closing them. [26]

It was at 2.25 pm on 20 May 1928 that John and Mary Fahey drove for the first time onto the ferry, their Chevrolet failed to stop and they plunged into the river. The puntman used his boat and threw a rope to rescue John, but Mrs Fahey, dragged down by a fur coat, drowned. As a result two circular lifebuoys were bought and the coroner's jury expressed the opinion that in future the tailboards should be fully raised when vehicles of any kind were being conveyed across the river. [27] This, incidentally, was a period of heavy usage. In the 13 weeks ended 30 June 1928, the tally was: motorcars 1149, motor trucks 154, motor-cycles 241, bicycles 529, horses and riders 631, horses and gigs 218, sheep 6505, cattle 33, horses 78, horse wagons 22, horse drays 124, sleighs 9. [28]

On 24 October 1931, two vehicles were on the punt - blacksmith Archie McCorkindale's car and Mrs Latimer, the puntman's wife, with her horse and gig. As the punt neared the staging

McCorkindale cranked up his car, forgetting he had left it in reverse gear, and it shot backwards, pushing horse and gig into the river. Mrs Latimer, clinging to the railing, was very fortunate not to be swept overboard. The gig was lost and the horse died two days later. Again operating changes were imposed: tail-gates to be raised to the vertical, chains to be in place 3 foot 6 inches above the deck, and a sign placed warning motorists to disengage the gear of their vehicles. [29]



Figure 12: Tuapeka Punt operator Peter Dickson, with his dog Mission (7), has been ferrying people and cars across the Clutha River for 16 years. Photo by Rachel Taylor.

Four years later, in October 1935, 10-year-old Rita Muirhead and her bicycle plunged off the staging while she was attempting to board the punt before it had reached the jetty. She was hauled out with the aid of a gaff. [30]

In 1943, Gerald James of Rongahere parked his grey V8 coupe at the top of the rise while he waited for the punt to arrive. Apparently as a result of brake failure, the car coasted down the slope, crossed the jetty and plunged into the river beneath the approaching punt. It was recovered the next day, the only damage being from water and silt. [31]

On 20 October 1986 George Johnston, his wife and a passenger were in a car which slowly approached the punt from the Tuapeka Mouth side. However, at the last moment, and before the loading flap could be raised, the car suddenly lurched across the deck and into the river. Fortunately it floated long enough to ground on a submerged rock, where the occupants opened the front doors and stood beside it amid the waters of a rapidly rising river. In the township the Whaarua Craft Shop was open and there were quite a number of people about. Rescuers floated a dinghy out on a rope from the punt, the three being plucked one by one from a very precarious

situation. On being checked their car was found to have had a mechanical fault. [32]

More recently, 27 November 1994, a minor mishap resulted in a member of a television crew sustaining a broken arm as a result of the punt striking one of the landing stages with more than usual force. [33]

In the big flood of 1978 the punt slipped from its moorings, broke the chain and shot across the river before being recovered by Lloyd Thompson. When this flood washed out the Clydevale bridge approaches and closed the bridge, traffic was diverted for some time via Tuapeka Mouth. [34]

Ron Dodds recalled that when he was appointed puntman the ferry had an auxiliary motor for emergency use, but it was removed during his time and not replaced. [35]

Once while the punt was closed awaiting the appointment of a new puntman, a resident joked of urgently having to retrieve honey from his bees on the Rongahere side. He and a mate took their tractor and trailer across on the punt, did the job, and quietly returned without any bother. Nor were they the only ones.

For a short period the punt had a one-armed puntman. R. Sell had lost an arm below the elbow, but despite that handicap he took charge briefly in 1977. [36]

A list of puntmen over the years is:

- W.G. Buchan, 1896–1900
- W. (Bill) Nehoff, 1900–1924
- W. (Bill) Latimer, 1924–1945
- W.S. Whitty, 1945–1946
- D.A. Houlston, 1947–1950
- W.H.J. (Bill) Small, 1950–1958
- W.E. (Bill) Gray, 1958–1975
- E.R. Tallentire, 1975–1977
- R. Sell, 1977
- R. McGowan, 1977
- Ron Dodds, 1977–1984
- L. Thompson, 1984–1994
- Peter J. Dickson, 1994 to present. [37]

Since the local body amalgamation in 1989, the controlling authority for the punt has become the Clutha District Council. These days the punt is most easily handled in the earlier part of the morning or in the late afternoon. This is when the river is high as a result of water being released from the Roxburgh power station. By midday, when the river is often low, the punt risks becoming stranded. The visitors' book records many overseas and New Zealand tourists whose remarks reflect enthusiasm for a unique experience. Local residents still use the punt regularly, especially customers using the garage,

but no stock is carried and the high cattle railings were removed when the district sales ended.

The Otago regional committee of the New Zealand Historic Places Trust took a keen interest in the punt from the 1970s and, although there was a brief technical debate whether the punt was a vessel (which did not come within the Trust's activities) or an installation (which did), it was soon agreed that New Zealand's last public punt was certainly an historic feature that deserved preservation. It was added to the New Zealand Heritage List/Rārangī Kōrero as a Category 1 historic place in February 2013 (List No. 9599). Special interest groups, such as motor-cycle and vintage clubs, also include the punt in their itineraries, and it still holds a warm place in the affections and interests of the district.

2.1 Picnic at the punt (commemorating 115 years of operation)



Figure 13: 115 year commemoration picnic event and vintage car rally at the punt. 26 February, 2012 (photo by Murray Service).

The commemoration picnic in 2012 was attended by locals and other interested persons from all over New Zealand. The event included continuous crossings on the punt with vintage cars and motorcycle groups taking advantage of the punt crossing experience. A school bus and class of school children also took the punt from the Rongahere side to attend the picnic. Side shows and arts and craft exhibitions were set up at the nearby showgrounds and the history of the punt and the area, including early gold field memorabilia, were on show at the adjacent school hall. Bill and Murray Service, grandsons of John Smith, the Clutha County foreman involved in bringing the punt from the Waiau River at Tuatapere to Tuapeka Mouth, also attended and set up a linear turbine being developed by Murray Service below the punt landing.



Figure 14: Punt in all its glory. Picnic at the punt 26 February, 2012 (photo by John McGowan).

2.2 Tuapeka Turbine [38]

The Tuapeka turbine was inspired by the Tuapeka punt and operates on a similar principle. Vanes are suspended from a cable/chain and are turned to an angle to the river flow (similar to turning the punt at an angle to the flow). The vanes are thus driven to move sideways across the river pulling the cable/chain which moves in a loop and rotates wheels at each end of the loop to generate power or pump water. This turbine has the advantage in that it can be installed across slow flowing rivers, such as the Clutha at Tuapeka Mouth, to harness the low head energy flow. The turbine is still in early development, and is currently the subject of a final year engineering project at Auckland University. [39]



Figure 15: Murray and Bill Service with Tuapeka turbine at the punt picnic 26 February, 2012 (photo by Shu Hashimoto)

3. Conclusion

The Tuapeka Mouth Ferry has special significance not only due to the longevity of its service to the local community but because its water motive power technique may inform present day exploration and experimentation in utilising water power. Murray Service is undertaking such work in New Zealand, in pursuit of economical electrical water generation units for isolated communities here and around the world. The Tuapeka Mouth

Ferry may in future serve as an available and useful test bed for future river turbines.

This important heritage item may well help us to make valuable advancements in harnessing our water resources into the future. This humble workhorse of a Ferry will continue to be a tourist attraction and enable people to experience a tranquil ride across the picturesque Clutha River.

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